

SENATE BILL REPORT

E2SHB 1659

As of February 26, 2022

Title: An act relating to making higher education more affordable and accessible for students by bridging the gap between cost and need to reduce barriers, improve opportunity, and advance economic security.

Brief Description: Making higher education more affordable and accessible for students by bridging the gap between cost and need to reduce barriers, improve opportunity, and advance economic security.

Sponsors: House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Slatter, Sullivan, Leavitt, Ryu, Morgan, Berry, Ramel, Thai, Wicks, Sells, Johnson, J., Berg, Bateman, Valdez, Chopp, Walen, Fey, Goodman, Gregerson, Taylor, Macri, Simmons, Wylie, Kloba, Pollet, Ormsby, Harris-Talley, Hackney and Frame).

Brief History: Passed House: 2/13/22, 83-15.

Committee Activity: Higher Education & Workforce Development: 2/22/22, 2/24/22 [DP-WM, DNP, w/oRec].
Ways & Means: 2/26/22.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Modifies the Washington College Grant (WCG) income eligibility thresholds and award levels.
- Entitles WCG students who are receiving the maximum WCG award to an additional annual stipend, called a bridge grant.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.
Signed by Senators Randall, Chair; Nobles, Vice Chair; Liias.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Minority Report: Do not pass.
Signed by Senator Holy, Ranking Member.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.
Signed by Senator Sefzik.

Staff: Alicia Kinne-Clawson (786-7407)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Staff: Michele Alishahi (786-7433)

Background: Washington College Grant. The State Need Grant was modified in 2019 and renamed the Washington College Grant (WCG). The WCG is the state's largest financial aid program and provides awards to low-income students to pursue postsecondary education. The WCG is an entitlement program with guaranteed awards for those students who qualify. The WCG award amount varies based on the institution the student attends and the student's family income. For example, for students attending the state's public institutions, the maximum award is tuition and services and activities fees for 15 quarter credit hours or the equivalent. For students attending private, four-year, not-for-profit higher education institutions, in 2019-20 the maximum award was \$9,739. An eligible student may receive a WCG for five years or up to 125 percent of the published length of the student's program. Part-time students receive prorated awards.

For the 2021-22 academic year, the median family income for a family of four is \$102,000.

Summary of Bill: Washington College Grant Eligibility and Award Changes. For academic years 2022-23 and 2023-24, the following WCG income eligibility thresholds and award amounts apply as follows:

Median Family Income	Award Amount
0-60 percent of state MFI	maximum award
61-70 percent of state MFI	60 percent of maximum award
71-75 percent of state MFI	50 percent of maximum award
76-80 percent of state MFI	25 percent of maximum award
81-100 percent of state MFI	10 percent of maximum award

Beginning with academic year 2024-25, the following WCG income eligibility thresholds and award amounts apply as follows:

Median Family Income	Award Amount
0-70 percent of state MFI	Maximum award
71-80 percent of state MFI	50 percent of maximum award
81-90 percent of state MFI	25 percent of maximum award
91-100 percent of state MFI	10 percent of maximum award

Bridge Grants. Bridge grants are annual stipends provided in addition to the WCG to provide supplementary financial support to low-income students to cover higher education expenses beyond tuition and fees.

Beginning with the 2022-23 academic year, WCG recipients who are receiving a maximum WCG award are also entitled to receive a bridge grant.

Beginning with the 2024-25 academic year, the bridge grant award amounts are as follows:

- for WCG recipients who are also recipients of the College Bound Scholarship, the bridge grant is \$500 annually; or
- for WCG recipients who are not College Bound Scholarship recipients, the bridge grant is \$1,000 annually.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Higher Education & Workforce Development):

PRO: It could be as simple as a bus ticket or a broken bike or a day of childcare. For many people this is a setback, but for about 40 percent of Washington students this can lead to them leaving higher education. With this bridge we are hoping to bridge this chasm. Sometimes its a very small cost or fee that can derail a student's education journey. I do not believe that you should have to be extraordinarily lucky or wealthy to achieve a credential. This bill provides bridge grants to help with those costs as well as higher award levels for many students. This is a small investment for a really important future. The college grant allows me to engage in college life without stress. Bridge grants would help students like me further participate in college without stress. This bill makes college more accessible and affordable for more students. The cost of tuition hasn't been unmanageable, but the costs associated with college can be overwhelming. This is a pivotal step in diversifying and increasing equity in our higher education system. Students are dropping out of college because its unaffordable. Incremental steps like this will help us keep students in college and strengthen our economic position. Many students are working multiple jobs and still

have to worry about meeting their daily needs while going to college. We think college should be cost free eventually, but this is a good step in that direction. The bridge grants are a vital addition to the state's program. These changes would make a true and significant difference for the students we educate. Increasingly our students are the first in their families to attend college. We applaud your efforts to expand need based aid. The students in Ms. Cohoe's class strongly encourage you to pass the bill as it will be good for students who can't pay for college.

Persons Testifying (Higher Education & Workforce Development): PRO: Representative Vandana Slatter, Prime Sponsor; Adelaide Ebrahimi; EDGAR ESPINO, Associated Students of Central Washington University (ASCWU); Landis Hanson, WSA, ASCWU; Alexis Hanson, Washington Student Association, Associated Students of the University of Washington Bothell; Evans Kaame, Communities for Our Colleges Coalition and Washington Student Association; Sadie Szeto; Mya Leonhard, Communities for Our Colleges Coalition, Highline College Student Government; Nancy Cruz, Communities For Our Colleges; Katharine Weiss, Washington State Nurses Association ; Shea Hamilton, Independent Colleges of Washington; Briahna Murray, Ms. Cohoe's Giandrone Middle School Class.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Higher Education & Workforce Development): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Ways & Means): PRO: This will make higher education more accessible by allowing greater affordability. College enrollment has been falling. Boosting access will help Latino and BIPOC students. This is an opportunity to continue to provide opportunities for our children to get ahead. This allows our children to continue looking forward to a higher education. Economic instability is at the top of the list for reasons students don't complete their education. This is a necessary step to ensuring more people can access college. Washington's low and middle income students are struggling. This award makes a difference for students in accessing and completing college. Current financial aid often doesn't cover related expenses when attending college such as housing.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): PRO: Angie Hinojos, Centro Cultural Mexicano; Carlos Jimenez, Centro Cultural Mexicano; Karen Strickland, AFT Washington; Sequoia Dolan, Communities for Our Colleges; Zackary Turner, Washington Student Association; Evans Kaame, Communities for Our Colleges Coalition and Washington Student Association; Jaelyn Sotelo, Washington Student Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Ways & Means): No one.